

Snippets of Beauty and the Bestial (1995-1999)

Κάλλος
αισχος



The following notebook fragments were taken during a period in which the pressures of combining study with full-time work made interludes on the home front especially precious:

A hint of spring: 

The shaft of late winter sunlight from the dull sky caught the branches outside the balcony window. It was the first hint that the days are getting longer.

As I leaned against the cold window, a tableau shimmered forth of another morning in early March:

Long ago and far away, a boy was snowshoeing across a frozen lake. It was bitterly cold but cloudless with the sun hanging just above the tops of the bare birches on the shoreline. Yet even in the deep freeze, every lull in the north wind brought a hint of warmth to the back of his neck. The touch of warmth was just enough to stir an excitement—almost sexual—of the coming spring...

1995, March

Frisson of joy: 

On an afternoon break from a morning at the computer, along with the kids I took a little exercise along the trail behind Pine Ridge. For much of the fast-walk, 3-year-old MH was perched on my shoulders and TE jogging along beside. After the morning of confinement, I was given to aimless chatter. Along the Shelmont fence, I hit upon religion:

"Yes, TE, you're not the only one who doesn't like church. When I was your age, I hated the very smell of church. Not just the building and everything in it—but even the words themselves stunk. 'Church', 'congregation', 'pew'—all those words smelled rotten." With a whiff towards the oil storage tanks above us, I quickened my pace.

"Don't run, dad. It's scary..." said little ME.

"Don't worry, honey," I clasped his hand, "I won't let you fall."

I slowed down.

"Isn't it wonderful to see things growing again?"

In the burst of sun through the new leaves, TE nodded.

"Yes, honey, I still remember hating the clothes I had to wear on Sunday morning. I can still feel my tight bowtie and itchy grey pants. As soon as I got home, I would tear off those Sunday clothes and pull on my jeans. I would grab my jack knife and head for the woods. That was *my* religion."

"Did you have a knife, dad?" Said MH, vibrating his lips on the top of my bare head.

"I did, M."

"Did you like the woods a little bit?"

"I loved the woods, M. I hope you will too."

Just then, a blonde jogger slowed up warily. Seeing the children, she smiled in passing. I released a held breath.

"Is this your favourite time of year, too, T.?"

My 8-year-old gave her mysterious smile.

Then in a tingle of excitement—I remembered last night's feedback from Professor K. on my final term paper for his course. Could he really have been serious in saying my little assignment was "potentially publishable"? Even if he was just patronizing an old guy, it was a bit of sweet vindication... Ironic, of course, that the effect expended on these Education papers is a fraction of that wasted on the slew of rejected poems and stories...

Jogging forward, I began to whistle: '*I've been working on the railroad*'.

“Com’on, guys, you know this one— sing!”

Don’t embarrass us, dad!” TE warned, nodding down towards the Greystone Avenue sidewalk from which a dog walker approached.

1995, April

fwt

Of the neck-tingling telepathy: 

TE and I had changed into bathing suit and were waiting by the university poolside for the end of the children's swimming class. For a few moments, we watched the little princesses in spangly caps performing for their daddies. It was then that the lifeguard walked back holding up his watch. Public swimming would not begin for another hour. With assignments looming, I decided to go home and try again tomorrow.

"We came up here for nothing!" said TE.

"Sorry, honey."

Alongside a sulking TE, I padded past the foggy windows back towards the changing rooms. Midway along the passage, a little girl scampered just ahead of her mommy and another girl, about TE's age. As we stood aside to let them pass, the younger girl froze. She then let out a tiny scream and ran back under her mother's arm.

In reaction, the mother jerked around and held out her other arm for the girl coming up behind. Grasping the shoulders of both girls she pulled them close. As we veered past, the mother stared directly into my face. It struck that she was probably memorizing details for recollection in a potential police alert ('Yes, I knew something was wrong when I saw that strange man with that girl! Yes, she looked intimidated or scared!')

Surely the observation that a child would be frightened by suddenly seeing a man with an empty sleeve is not paranoia! I grabbed TE's hand and walked faster, however likely to trigger further neck-tingling telepathy of distress...

1995, May

A dream of flying: 

On the way to the Mountain Village corner store for a carton of milk, I asked MT about her latest swimming course and promised her that one day, we would on a tropical vacation together. I then described my experience snorkelling in the Indian Ocean in another life, 15 years ago.

““Swimming in warm water over coral is incredibly beautiful,” I said, as we followed our bobbing flashlight beam through the drizzle. “It’s like a dream of flying—but with brighter colours.” I patted her shoulder. “Diving would probably even be more amazing. Maybe one day we can take a scuba diving course together.”

“How old do I have to be for that?”

“I’m not sure. I think 15 or 16 is probably old enough.”

“I can’t wait, dad!”

As she squeezed my hand, I thought how she liked to lay reading on the carpet at my back while I pecked away at my keyboard. 6 years from now, will we still be so close? Even though there may be no vacations in the tropics—nothing would be more amazing than our closeness enduring. Perhaps I should already be bracing for her adolescence—just 3 years away...

1995, October

Of the torture of commas: 

It's your thesis advisor." With a look of alarm, T. handed me the phone at the bathroom door.

Appropriate, that the phone call from Professor G. came when I was wiping the bum of little MH. I had expected her usual cheery greeting followed by upbeat feedback in a voice slightly thicker than its daytime version. When I took the phone, it was instantly clear that the professor's mood was different.

"What's going on?" she began. "If I may be blunt— this chapter is cowardly and timorous."

I squeezed the phone between shoulder and ear and pulled up MH's training pants...

"Go see what your sisters are up to, honey," I whispered.

"You seem to be describing bad teaching in your chapter," said the professor with a fillip of scorn. "It is shocking to think that you could be describing your own classroom."

In rising panic, I interrupted. "Maybe I didn't make it clear enough, but I was certainly *not* describing my own classroom."

She chortled. "Well I certainly hope you weren't! If I thought you were a lousy teacher, I wouldn't be working with you."

In the sting, I tried to shift to safer ground: "Well, over the years, I think I do know what goes on in typical ESL settlement programs. Curricula is mostly based in functional themes: shopping, housing, getting around. Finding opportunities to include any aesthetic content is not easy."

She snorted. "Well, I'm surprised that you think what you described is *typical*. One of my students who also works with adult immigrants defended her thesis in January. It was wonderful— full of delightful humanistic ideas. She actually taught her adult students fairy tales so that they could read them in English to their own children."

"That sounds wonderful," I duly effused, "But I'm surprised that she was able to work those activities into the standard curricula. Of course, skilled teachers work hard at making their lessons fun and interesting. But students do get tired and even discouraged with the long days and the survival focus."

"Yes," she said acidly, "in your tone—I *do* sense fatigue."

That jab struck a nerve. "Dr. G., are you telling me that the whole chapter is crap?"

"Hold on— don't get so defensive. It's salvageable. I just see a need for major revision."

"That's no problem at all," I clenched teeth. "Can you just give some specific recommendations?"

"Just wait a second. Let me get it."

In the half minute she was seemingly rummaging—or taking a fortifying gulp—I was sucking cold air. What hope now of meeting the deadline of end of December for finishing off with this bullshit?

So far, the working relationship with Professor G. had been cordial. It was even assumed that she appreciated being relieved of the usual handholding and drama often needed with younger charges. At this late stage, does she suddenly think she's been duped?

There was a cough and a rustling of paper.

“You still there?”

“Yes, Dr. G.?”

“OK, it’s mostly the tone you need to work on. Try to make it more upbeat. You also have some have problems with style. For a simple example: your commas. I just can’t figure out any pattern. I think I’ve brought this up to you before.”

“Sorry.”

“Foreign students usually have to be told just once about specific problems of grammar or punctuation. When they knew they’re making mistakes they go to the *Fowlers’ Style Guide*, read the rules and make the necessary changes. You’re an English *teacher*, right? How can you teach this stuff if you don’t know it yourself?”

Just then little MH was at my knees waving his figurines of Hulk Hogan and the mad Ayatollah.

“Let’s pay wrestlers, da!”

“Later honey.”

“So, you have your family to attend to,” said Professor G. “That’s all for now, anyway. You can pick up the hard copy at the Education Office. Just read the marginal comments.”

“Thanks again for your feedback, Dr. G. I really appreciate your time.”

No problem. That’s my duty.”

For several moments, I leaned in the doorway, squeezing the phone. Professor G. is well reputed to suffer no fools. Perhaps she is even annoyed for having taken so long to spot an imposter before he sloppily revealed himself...

After that twinge of paranoia, I consoled myself with the thought that I should be grateful to have a drill sergeant supervisor. By having dodged boot camp 20 years ago—it is perfectly just that I be harangued at the age of 44 for an unwieldy use of commas...

1995, December

Of promises: 

In find the Kensington ice rink closed to afternoon public skating, MT was naturally disappointed that we could not partake of our Christmas family tradition. Still, while her mom drove back to Forest Grove with TE and baby MH, our eldest submitted to walking back home with me. It was fairly mild—nearly 5° in mid-afternoon although hoarfrost remained in the shadows untouched by the wane solstice sun. It was at the intersection of University Drive and Gagliardi, that there opened a 180° view to the southern horizon. To the southwest, Boundary Bay shimmered like beaten gold. To the southeast, the snowy dome of Mount Baker glowed rosy in the low sun. In awe of this unexpected gift of ‘*kalon*’, we stopped up.

"M.," I said, "You probably haven't heard of the poet John Keats, have you?"

"No, Dad."

Hopefully you will read at least one of his poems in high school. He was only 25-year-old when he died but he wrote some of the most beautiful lines ever written in English. In one of his most famous poems he wrote: *"Beauty is truth, truth beauty: that is all you ever need to know..."*

I squeezed her hand, "Try to remember that, OK?"

"Sure, dad. We're going to stop at the corner store on the way home, for the treat like you promised?"

"Just like I promised, honey."

Fortunately, she'll still not yet old enough to add: *'like you promised so that I would walk back with you instead of going in the car...'*

1995, December

While in awe of Hyakutake: 

"Look dad, you can see the stars!"

The gift of a second chance was bestowed tonight for my broken promise of waking the kids at 3:00 AM on Sunday morning in order to see the Hyakutake comet in a clear sky. At 10:00 PM, just as I pulled into the driveway from the late shift, I was met by the girls wrapped in their mother's jackets. MT had my binoculars at the ready.

"Where's MH?"

"He's sleeping," said MT, "mom didn't want to wake him up. "Let's go!"

In our lucky break between low fronts, we drove up to the lookout over Burnaby Mountain Park where light pollution was less than that of the balcony.

After parking, we walked with a flashlight to the fence above the north side cliffs. MT, training the binoculars to the northern sky as directed in the *Vancouver Sun* article, was the first to spot the comet among the stars over Indian Arm.

There it is!"

After her look, she handed the binoculars, as directed, to her younger sister. TE had trouble with the focus, but to make sure she was looking in the right spot, I took a quick turn. It was just a fuzzy blob but definitely brighter than the ghostly flashlight beam of Halley's, seen more than a decade ago in Africa. Yet Hyakutake was not so long of tail.

I handed the binoculars back to TE and gestured towards the yellow light from the city spread behind.

"You know in the ancient days—long before radio and electricity—people paid very close attention to the night sky."

In the girls' silence, I went on. "They knew the patterns of the stars as well as they knew the landscape around their villages. They would have seen a lot of shooting stars, but comets are rare. Just think of how those ancients must have felt in seeing a comet!"

"Pretty special," said MT, "I'm getting cold."

"Me, too," said TE nodding head beneath my hand.

"OK," I gave both a shivering hug, "but do remember this!"

As we turned to follow TW's joggling flashlight beam back to the parking lot, I briefly recalled the passage at the end of Koestler's '*Darkness at Noon*'. The old Bolshevik, arrested in a Stalinist purge, awaits execution in a prison cell haunted for not predicting the outcome of the revolution for which

he had given his life. If he could have it all over, he reflects, he would certainly have studied astronomy.

If I had it all over, I shivered, I might well have pursued the same...

1996, March

fwt

Of torpor 

What a contrast was this afternoon's visit to Crescent Beach with the idyllic memories of earlier years! Perhaps it was the slant of the August sun compared to the suns of late May.

Even though the temperature was mild today, the tidepools seemed too chilly for wading. Then there was the smell: a pungent odour of rotting seaweed tangy with sewage and the beach detritus of a long hot summer, stewing like unwashed sheets. There was no escaping that stench, as the in-coming tide swirled around our ankles, seaweed streaked with diaphanous strands of what could have been toilet paper and the bleached shells of crab.

After less than an hour, sitting against a beached log, the kids were listless to go home...

Even with the windows open, the sea-rot smell was stronger than the smell of diesel through the traffic jam up King George Highway. A change of clothes and 20 minutes in the shower could not kill it. Even 5 hours later when I lay in front of the TV, sea-rot still exuded from the palm of my hand.

Meanwhile, it occurred that the stink was not of the Boundary Bay at all, but rather a manifestation of self-disgust. The precious 'grey days' between the summer and fall terms, have been largely squandered. The photocopied academic journal articles saved for the precious break have been scarcely touched. Wherever acuity was honed during the research regimen of 6 months ago has all but dulled. Muscle is turning into flab.

Just hours away from shuffling back on the ESL treadmill, it is *just* that I should find myself enveloped in this unremovable stench...

1996, August

The millennium's last lunar eclipse: 

In the 35-minute drive home from the night shift I speeded through every yellow light so that I could get home on time to watch with the kids, the eclipse of the full moon. East from Parker to Hastings, the celestial event was already underway: the fuzzy edge of the moon over Burnaby Mountain was growing faintly bloody...

For an instant I recalled the last full moon eclipse witnessed as a teenager. My tingling scalp on that night was as much from the after-effects of amphetamine pills as from the spectacle of a blood moon over the natal village. Particularly momentous was its occurrence in the hours before Good Friday.

Nearly 3 decades later, the bloody edge of the moon was already receding by the time I parked. Still, I dashed up the steps breathless for a glimpse (apparently the last in this millennium) through binoculars before the fuzzy edge clarified.

"Did you ever see a full moon eclipse like this?" I asked T. who was on the balcony, blanket on knees, with the sleepy kids. She glanced to TE who sobbed, head buried in her own blanket.

"She's angry with mommy," said MT, "She had her ear pulled."

"So, did you see the blood moon, honey?" I said, patting TE's knee.

"It's boring", she sobbed.

"Everything's boring to her!" scoffed the elder sister.

"Shut up!" the younger wailed.

"Shuuuh!"

By the time I took up the binoculars, only a bite of the moon was still fuzzily obscured. Meanwhile, it was growing chillier...

After closing the drapes on the balcony door, T. and the kids made their way sleepily up the stairs. I lingered for a while in the living room. As I'd planned the drive home, I played '*the Moonlight Sonata*' on the stereo. I hadn't expected to listen alone...

By the final notes of the timeless 1st movement, the harvest moon had re-emerged from shadow—bathing the balcony in pale white.

1996, September

From the scrapbook of innocence: 

For a glorious moment, our black plastic kite treaded the blue air nearly 10 meters above the North Coquitlam park. To maintain the tension on the kite string, I walked backwards up the grass incline in the brisk spring breeze. 4-year-old MH jogged along beside, his face shining.

“You take it honey,” for a few seconds, my little son and I held the taut string together, still backing up and paying out line...

Yet suddenly, the wind died, the line slackened, and the kite wobbled. It nose-dived and bounced onto the turf where a squealing TE ran to pick up it up. It was damaged in the crash. The flight of the Kmart kite was brief—but those few seconds provided a clipping for the family scrapbook of innocence.

Sleepless 13 hours later—the fingers still could still feel that sure tug of the kite as it swooped up to its zenith...

1997, April

fwt

Remembering a life: 

I was in bed flipping through the atlas to a map of Spain when images from October 1971 wavered forth:

Along with my village comrade, I was about a month into my first trip abroad. We had made our way by bicycle from Barcelona to Almeria where we had wobbly plans to continue our tour in Morocco.

In the pension where we'd arrived late the night before, I awoke before dawn to the sound of Arabic music playing on a radio on the next room. It was an instant reminder that the same evening we would be catching the ferry across the Mediterranean for the North African coast...

Later that afternoon, we waited for the ferry in the Almeria harbour along with several other backpackers. A blonde couple from St. Augustine, Florida asked us to watch their backpacks while they swam from the dockside. We felt like chickadees perched among orioles.

By dusk, we found ourselves in a crushing ferry line-up. Near midnight when the ferry finally departed, we were squeezed into fusty 3rd class berths in the bottom deck. Still in bravado, I shared the bottle of cheap Negrita rum with the 3 young Spaniards who shared our cabin. While my village companion became violently ill in the swell, I fought back the nausea and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Bobbing up woozy in the fetid cabin at dawn, I lurched topside to blow off the stink. Hungover, I balanced on the guard-rail drinking in the cool salt air blowing over the dark blue sea. Tingling to the core, I watched the coastal cliffs, growing reddish yellow in the rising sun. I can scarcely recall any other moment more intense than that first glimpse of Africa...

1997, May

Of the backyard radishes: 

The radishes which T. planted just a week ago, are already burgeoning from the tiny backyard garden. Almost every evening she has been out in the backyard with hoe or water can, lovingly attending to the tomatoes, carrots and radishes she planted in mid-April.

Meanwhile, the kids are finally settling into this neighbourhood where we moved just last fall. This afternoon there was 10-year-old TE, with her new friend from down the block, looping around the street on her bike. Preteen MT and her new school friends were on the front lawn shooting a school video about Peru. 4-year old MH was playing with the garden hose at the side of the house—making rainbows in the dazzling June sun.

All this is just 6 weeks away from the next upheaval and transplantation: this time halfway across the world.

Do the teachers of basic English in the Gulf States not dream of settling in Canada with full-time union jobs? Yet here I am, about to abandon our newly mortgaged house and drag my family to the Arabian Gulf. Is this really less about their opportunity for international education than about my own deep-seated recklessness?

Little wonder that as the departure date draws near, the excitement that propelled me to send off the application amid February drear, has been supplanted by night sweats. Even in the light of reason, the risks seem increasingly daunting.

I am reminded of the Buddhist parable of the doomed fellow clinging to the side of a cliff before falling to oblivion. In his last seconds, he grabs up a wild strawberry growing in the cliff side. It is naturally: “*the sweetest thing he’d ever tasted.*”

So it is that the backyard radishes that we will never taste grow sweeter by the hour...

1997, June (Coquitlam)

The following notebook excerpts from '97-'99 were taken while on a teaching contract in Dubai, accompanied by wife and three children:

Desert rainstorm: 

T. and I woke at 3:30 AM to the rattle of the windowpanes from deep pulses of thunder.

Creeping out to open the balcony door, I was almost pushed back into the living room by the gale blowing in from the harbour. 6 stories below along Mankool Boulevard, tossing plane trees were whipped by pellets of hail. Amid the flashing blackness, stinging needles of rain, driven almost horizontal, were drumming against the glass door. The monsoon blew onto the edge of the desert emptying itself in torrential rain...

45 minutes later, distant thunder still faintly rumbled amid the amplified echoes of the Muezzin prayer call. In the grey light, shattered trees and brown-water lakes filled the paw-prints of the passing behemoth...

1997, October (Dubai)

fwt

Torment for the Righteous:

On this busy Saturday morning start of the work week, I had to wait more than a half hour before flagging down a pirate taxi. It was particularly annoying after the failure of T. and I get our driving licence applications processed at the Dubai traffic Police Department on Thursday morning. During the long wait in the sweaty queue it was obvious that without ‘wasta’ [personal connections] an approval could take months. Until we get licences and a vehicle, we are dependent on taxis for both shopping and commuting to work.

The ride I finally hailed from in front of the Oasis Apartments this morning, was a smelly Corolla driven by a turbaned Pakistani driver. When I stated my destination, he scratched his henna-stained beard and motioned me to enter. Otherwise, he gave the impression of knowing little English. In silence, we wended out through the maze of high-rise towers towards the Martoum Bridge. Then in observing a tall young woman coming out of the main entrance of the Golden Sands apartments, the driver suddenly spoke:

“No good ladies. Him *haram*!”

The young woman slipped on sunglasses and shook uncovered blondish hair. Indeed, she might well have been one of the infamous Russians known to take long working ‘vacations’ in Dubai. This morning, it appeared she was only walking down the block towards Spinney’s supermarket...

“Too much in Dubai!” the driver growled. He rolled down his window and spat.

‘Dubai is itself a whore!’

In that moment, I recalled the whispered comment of the Brit whom T. and I met outside the Dubai traffic Police Department on Thursday. He was also an instructor at the Men’s College, although in the technical department—*ergo* with considerably higher status and salary than me. While T. and I were frustrated after our wild goose chase of driving licence applications, my colleague was bitter for having just paid a 500 Dirham traffic fine.

“You are not going to like it here,” said the stocky Brit, glancing between us. “Dubai is a very insensitive place.”

The implication was clear. As a mixed couple, we have already been met with rude stares.

“I’m glad to be finishing my contract next June.” he said, face reddening, “I can’t imagine renewing. This is such a shallow place... And the changing of rules and regulations is so arbitrary. If they suddenly decide they don’t like Canadians,” he sneered, “then you’re out of here tomorrow!”

I took that as a tiny poke at the fact that both the current principal and vice principal of our college were from Ontario. At the same time, it was a running joke (especially with Brits) that the Central Services of the college system was dominated by a ‘Canadian Mafia’...

He leaned closer in a hoarse whisper. "Yes, we are all here as mercenaries and the Emiratis can hate us for it. But that doesn't change the fact that *Dubai is itself a whore!*"

Past Spinneys supermarket, the Pakistani driver looked in the rear-view mirror:

"Not good! Too much want this fucking." He thumped the wheel. "You know, the cat see the fish. You tell cat (you know cat, yes?) *don't to eat that fish!* Him eat. This lady—Him too much open leg." He jerked hips in emphasis. "Dubai this fucking business too much!"

He fell back into silence until we approached the Maktoum Bridge. With the towers of Deira stretching before us over the Dubai creek, he sighed. "You know, everybody follow Koran—Holy Koran—be peace, be happiness!"

With right hand in lap, he fingered his prayer beads. Such torment for the righteous—the fleshpots of Dubai!

1997, October (Dubai)

fwt

Dubai, naked: 

The visit to Manzur Park beach began pleasantly, with 6-year-old MH and I wading alone the shore. The sand was soft, the salt air clean and the tickling waves warm. But halfway down the shoreline, we stopped in disgust. Bobbing at our feet were bloated oranges and onions, coated in what appeared to be 'Bunker-C' oil. Another few meters through brown froth were dozens of washed up packs of Kent cigarettes. They were all unopened but smeared in reddish-brown oil.

"Gee," said "MH, "some guy dropped a lot of cigarettes!"

"No, M., I winced in the sudden reek of tar. "It looks like a crate or part of a container must have fallen off a ship and washed ashore. Careful not to step in the gunk."

Stepping back from the shore, I motioned for MH to sit down and check the bottom of his feet. As expected, we both had blackened soles.

I looked out towards the tankers and freighters moored in the hazy blue distance and then across to the yellowish high-rises of Sharjah. I then turned towards the bouncy castle where young men in dishdashas frolicked. Watching them from the ice cream kiosk were black veiled Emirati girls and even a bikinied Russian girl holding two cones. Hail the Disneyland of the Gulf!

Ad. Note:

Earlier in the morning, MH and I browsed the market in the old souk on Dubai Creek. The baskets of freshly caught fish and butchers' tables were glimpses of a rapidly disappearing era. MH was particularly struck by the hanging row of skinned beasts. We paused a moment before their obscene nakedness...

"Are those dogs?" asked my son in the terrible fascination of gouged throats and gelid blue eyes.

"Not dogs, honey," I said, drawing him in from the South Asian servants shoving past, "they're sheep."

1998, February (Dubai)

Relishing the fear and loathing: 

Tonight 13-year-old MT and I walked the corniche along Dubai Creek. Amid the winking fairyland lights, I recalled the comment I'd made in the afternoon email to old buddy, BS, in Victoria.

In the dark humour long practiced through our decades of correspondence, he asked how it felt being a Canadian peasant in the Arabian Gulf. In the characteristically self-effacing manner he has always expected, I replied: '*As one who relishes the fear and loathing engendered by my presence in beautiful places among beautiful people—I am delightfully indulged...*'

Oddly enough, a grain of truth in the joke was immediately borne out as we walked along the palatial yachts moored in the Dubai Creek marina.

"Look at that, Dad!" said MT, drawing attention to a veritable Queen Mary in quarter scale. The palatial craft carried on her stern the green flag of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and bore boldly on her side the inscription in English of her name and home port: she was the *Pharaoh* of Jeddah.

As MH and I leaned over the corniche railing, a woman in chic *abaya* and high heels appeared above the yacht's gangway. Holding up a video camera, she began panning it along the bustling Dubai souk.

As her camera dipped in our direction, I all but caught a flicker of her dread: '*How dare that Eurotrash spoil my view!*'

Yet Eurotrash, along with the scores off-duty south Asian workers, were free to rubberneck along the Dubai corniche. Unlike Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles or Ocean Drive in Miami, there were as yet no armed security guards to hustle away the human eyesores. At least in that respect, Dubai had a better claim to a libertarian spirit than the USA.

1998, February (Dubai)

In mustering gratitude: 

For about 10 minutes after today's lesson observation, I reveled in relief. Through a grammar point ('present vs past participle adjectives') I practiced all 4 skills and wrapped the lesson around a funny little story (*Why Othman feels frustrated when his classes are frustrating ...*) The students behaved well, responding on cue— keeping the Arabic chatter to a minimum.

Supervisor MG's grin seemed to signal that he was impressed.

With the successful observation, I had passed my probationary period and could now look forward to the June bonus. I felt giddy as a kid on Christmas Eve until halfway down the corridor to the staffroom, I noticed my tie. Across the red and white stripes was a black smudge of ink from a felt pen. On my pale blue shirt were 3 more black blots. In a hot stab, I wheeled around and make for the men's room.

I tried scrubbing at the blotches with paper towels, but the ink was permanent. I stared in the mirror. Gouts of sweat were breaking from my forehead. At least I didn't have any black marks on my face. Still, I had been blithely going through my motions, when everyone in the room were looking at those splotches down my front. So that's what MB's grin was about!

I tore off my tie. With just one more period (mercifully in the computer lab) and by buttoning my jacket—I was able to get through the rest of the afternoon.

In the taxi back across the Maktoum bridge to the Oasis apartments, reason began to reassert it. After a few hours, who but me would even remember those smudges? Still I had to wonder: what exactly was the driver of the will to self-sabotage *this time*?

Splashing my face, I resolved to try to be more perceptive of detail. At the same time, I conceded that gratitude was still in order: at least my fly had been zipped.

1998, April (Dubai)

A good day to die: 

13-year old MT and I drove in the Ford Explorer to Korfakan, Fujairah Emirate, for our first open water dive off the reef. As we sped along the desert towards the rising sun, the dark mountains of the Musandam peninsula wavered into view.

On the CD player was Robbie Robertson's '*Music for the Native Americans*' beginning with the ethereal drums and chanting of '*Coyote Dance*'. Moved, I remembered a sunny May morning, *circa* 1975, on Jericho Beach, Vancouver with old buddy, JL. His wife had just kindly finished typing up a term paper which I would mail back east to complete my year-long procrastinated undergrad work. As JL and I sprinted along the shoreline I could well have been Mercury with wings on heels...

I also remembered a fall night a few years ago walking with MT to the Forest Grove corner store. When I promised her that one day we would go snorkeling together, it seemed an impossible dream. Yet now we are about to take our first PADI-certified dive. I looked over at my beautiful eldest, snoozing against the armrest. As joyful as this is—was it worth the sacrifice of uprooting ourselves for the sojourn here? Was this worth forfeiting doctoral studies—jeopardizing my marriage?

Despite that taunting, the eyes misted in the next number on the CD: '*The Vanishing Breed*'... Never had a guitar so soared into sublimity! It struck me that one's memory would be deeply honoured by the accompaniment of such sublime music to the scattering of his ashes...

I flipped down the visor, dazzled by the sun, edging over the dark cliffs. Yes, this was one of those shining moments—seemingly as enduring as Platonic forms. Moments later, as we wound down the other side of the ridge towards the Gulf, the track playing was—appropriately—'*It is a good day to die*'...



Our dive was quite as spectacular as anticipated: 5 meters below Martini Rock off Korfakan, MT and I finned through the undersea forest of pale purples and pinks. Dark schools of tropical fish wavered above and below, often appearing as a single twitching organism.

In watching the schools by turns zigzagging and hovering in the safety of their masses —yet keeping calculated safe distances—I was reminded of the similarly precise movement of herds of zebra and wildebeest beheld in 1981 on the Simanjero Plain.

1998, October (Dubai)

Air war: 

Just as last year, I volunteered with the college ‘Paper Rally’. Coinciding with the Dubai Shopping festival, the rally is a much-ballyhooed event in which groups of students race to decipher clues and collect a list of arcane items from around the city. In fact, it is a glorified scavenger hunt for overgrown kids. Last year’s prizes included big screen TVs, boomboxes and computers.

Once again, I was relegated to a minor role, assisting one of the ‘checkpoint judges.’ Posted to Safa Park and with little to do, at least I was able to bring along daughter, TE, who had no other plans on this first day of her school weekend. From 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM we sat on folding chairs in the shade of a date palm handing out snacks and bottles of water to the student teams, rushing through.

Around noon, a curious phenomenon occurred above our heads. It started with crows chasing gulls. Scores of gulls banked, veered and swooped over the park in defensive maneuvers. After the crows retreated from the air war, the numbers of gulls began to multiply. Eventually, the wheeling and screeching in the blue sky could have been an audition for a remake of the Hitchcock classic.

Then in the blaze of the noonday sun, the first birds started falling. Whether they were overcome by the heat, injured in mid-air collision or had succumbed to something more mysterious—over the next hour, several gulls fell flopping into the grass around us.

Emirati Shopping Festival picnickers scarcely took notice. Two student helpers in the Rally support team calmly spread their Lebanese takeaway on the grass, dipping bread into hummus and munching on grilled chicken. Less than a meter away, fallen birds still twitched.

When a lunch from MacDonald’s was delivered for the ‘checkpoint judges’, TE and I managed only a few bites of the proffered cheeseburgers. It would be another hour before a red uniformed park cleaner began scooping up the still twitching bodies. A half dozen of the birds had fallen within a few meters of our chairs. Queasily we watched as the dead and dying creatures were stuffed in a green garbage bag along with the detritus of the morning’s Shopping Festival sponsored popcorn eating contest.

One gull, lucky to have fallen within the shadow of our tree, still flapped and blinked its eyes. TE, in her natural affection for little creatures, kept dribbling water over it in attempt to keep it cool. Unfortunately, by the time of our departure, the shadow was retreating and the poor bird exposed to the direct desert sun.

“Sorry, honey, there’s nothing we can do. Nature will just take its course.”

My sweet fledgling stifled tears as we walked back towards our vehicle.

1999, March (Dubai)

What lies beyond the breakwater? 

In snorkeling along the Jumeirah breakwater in the noonday sun, my face mask view was crystal clear. Swimming below me were schools of tropical fish: needle-nosed, striped yellow and electric blue. Alerted by my moving shadow, some wavered through the spiny urchins and dark red coral branches. At one point, a manta ray, fanned ahead in tiny explosions of mud.

These ‘weekend’ (Thursday and Friday) swims have been so exquisitely pleasurable that I now ration them to ever-shorter sessions. With just weeks to go before departure back to northwest grey, I need to wean myself away from this bright colour.

Still, as I finned along today through the coral majesty—I wrestled with temptation. Maybe it is not too late to renew the contract here!

What really is there to go back to? Security? At my age and seniority there, I might still be teaching split shifts in church basements at the age of 60—if I live that long. A pension? Having not started on the plan until the age of 38 and with 3 kids to get through school—retirement before 65 would be in a trailer park on a dog food diet. How tempting it is to email both the college and the union president politely informing them to shove their pension plan—along with their holy seniority!

Alternatively, if I could cling here for 12 more years, I could grow a modest nest egg while the kids continue to benefit from international schools. Meanwhile, I could continue with the weekly delight of these swims. Why not be bold?

The irony in the temptation was of course, that the indecision on the cusp of leaving Dubai is as agonizing as that endured before coming. Also, just as before coming, anxiety of indecision is accompanied by guilt. Yet again, I am uprooting my poor fledglings from school and friends...

In that realization, up through the shimmering turquoise there bubbled a wintery groan.

1999, April (Dubai)

The following notebook snippets were taken within the first weeks back into former routines after the two-year sojourn in Dubai:

Dragged back to sobriety: 

"So, you had your adventure, did you?" asked BG with a grin.

He and his wife had just dropped off the TV they had 'babysat' during our 2-year sojourn in Dubai. We are still in the midst of unpacking, but T. insisted they stay for tea. A social worker and a Montessori teacher, they had been our neighbours for 6 years in the coop on Burnaby Mountain. In the fall of '96, they had even lent a hand when we moved to Coquitlam.

"Well, it was not exactly an adventure," I said.

BG looked up the stairs where T. and his wife were lingering. They were winding down their chat about her school district applications, while BG was more eager to get going.

"No?"

"Not exactly, B. We were both working 5 days week— just like here. It was just a change of scene."

"Too bad your tenant didn't work out so well. At least he didn't trash your place."

Unwisely, in our chat, I had told him about the bounced checks of the French-Canadian renter which caused considerable anxiety from afar. That titbit was revealed almost as a gesture of compensation for his help. BG would be reassured to know that we had paid dearly for our little getaway.

"Yeah, it could have been worse," I said. "At least he vacated on time. Can you imagine what it would be like coming back with no place to stay?"

"Can't even imagine! Anyway, we're still looking," he said, "Now that the prices have bottomed out— we just might take the plunge."

I winced in his reminder that in addition to losing money on a bad tenant, most of our equity evaporated with the fallen real estate values.

"Yes, it's good time, to buy," I said. "You're lucky."

"No, careful!" he smiled.

At the doorway, I glanced up into the grey. "Looks like we might be in for one of those wet summers," I said.

“Yup,” he tipped his cap, “welcome back to the rain!”

In walking out him out to his car, I again expressed our gratitude for his help. For his part, he grinned— seemingly in the amusement of witnessing a nose-rubbing in Canadian sobriety.

1999, July (Coquitlam)

fwt

Déjà vu in the hallway: 

"Teacher, I want change class!"

In the final hour of just the second evening back on the night shift at the college: there was the distress call. It was from Sophie, a Chinese student wheedling to be shifted to a lower class.

Instead of the usual plea for patience, I immediately caved:

"Yes, you need to feel happy with your class, Sophie. I'll see what I can do."

It seemed a fair reminder that my charges were no longer largely easy-going (however immature) Emirati lads...

Still, there was the final hour to get through. During the coffee break, that was complicated in seeing 3 other students in the hallway clustered around Sophie. If she got out of my boring class so easily—why shouldn't they try their luck?

In the trill of alarm, I realized I had to somehow make a connection with all the students individually. How could I possibly do that? I then remembered that sometimes last-minute spaces open up in the computer labs. So it was, that with just 10 minutes to spare, I was able to ditch the reading comprehension passage for a lucky berth in the computer lab. While the class worked on a vocabulary game, I could work on reassuring the skittish.

Relieved, I was rushing back down the hallway to gather up my students when a call came from behind.

"F, is that you?"

Before turning around, I cringed in the familiar voice. It was DM, the former librarian who worked part-time in the church basement department. He has a reputation for being a reliable last-minute sub but also an obsequious gossip.

"So how was Japan?" Superciliously, he smiled.

"Hi, D. I wasn't in Japan."

"O, right—you were in Saudi Arabia, weren't you? I was thinking of A." He referred to another bald instructor in my department. "I get you two mixed up."

"Well, I'm back now. Back to the old grind."

"Yes, F.— and you never know—with bumpings around here you could end up back in our department again!"

In a stab of drear, I recalled my last church basement stint in the fall of '96. It was in the weeks thereafter that I applied for the extended leave.

“True enough,” I said.

“So how was Saudi—“

“Sorry, D.,” I gotta get back to class!”

"OK— hey, I got your name right this time, didn't I?"

I gave a ‘search me’ gesture at the same instant that I shivered in a *déjà vu*. Yes, I *have* been here before—countless times. When I wrestled with the decision of whether to come back to this job—moments like these were precisely foreseen...

Half jogging down the hallway, I was again reminded of the blind Tiresias— who sees the future yet who is utterly powerless to alter it...

1999, Aug. 6

fwt

Another ounce of flesh: 

This afternoon's sequence of events that lead to a near disaster started with the dilation drops. They were inserted during my eye exam by the Port Coquitlam Optometrist. Without a warning to avoid driving for the rest of the afternoon, I donned my wraparound Arabian Gulf sunglasses and immediately drove home to pick up the kids. They had earlier agreed to accompany me grocery shopping.

Even with the novelty of the new Dodge Minivan, all 3 were squirmy and peevish. There was no bickering, as customary, as to who should sit in the front passenger seat. Taking up the 2 rear seats they whispered among themselves as we drove to Superstore. I could well have been a taxi driver. On the way home from the grocery shopping, I hoped that they would be mollified by a stop at the video store.

As we headed for Rogers' Video, I was still wearing the dark glasses. I turned into the strip mall off Westwood St. with an impatient driver edging me from behind. Urged on by 7-year old MH sitting directly behind me ("Park there! Park there!") I swung into what looked like the only available space. At the same instant, the warning cry of "*watch out!*" by 14-year-old MT did not register until the bump and crunch.

I tore off my sunglasses in the horror that I'd driven over something very hard. Yet instead of immediately stopping—I panicked and jerked into reverse, hitting something ever harder. Half dazed, I shut off the ignition, twisted around and shouted.

"Get to hell out!"

"You must be blind!" MT shouted. "That was so dumb!"

While she was opening the right sliding door for MH and herself, TE in the second rear seat was still unbuckling.

"Hurry!"

In the sudden whiff of gasoline, I jumped out and pulled open the left sliding door for TE. Gas was already beginning to puddle under the car and run towards the drain a few meters behind.

"I'll bet now we won't get our video," TE 'tsked'.

"Just get away, go on—quick!"

In the horror of a conflagration, I waved her onto the sidewalk from where her siblings forlornly watched. Then kneeling at the open car door to look under the chassis—I immediately saw what I'd run over.

It was a protruding concrete knob—obviously a barrier to prevent drivers from taking a short cut to the few spaces in front of the store. The post had slammed along the underside of the new van.

A ruptured gas tank was possibly the least of the damage. In that sickening instant, I thought of the iceberg ripping along the underside of the Titanic.

As the punctured tank (filled at the Superstore gas bar just moments before) continued to drain, the rising smell of gas triggered alarm. Patrons emerging from the store fronts were pulling out their cell phones. Before I could dig out mine, at least one of the onlookers called 911.

The kids were quite justifiably embarrassed to be standing beside me as we waited for the fire truck. It took about 15 excruciating minutes to arrive. Mercifully enough, the fire truck pulled in without a blaring siren or flashing emergency lights. At least we were spared a crowd of gawkers or even BC TV cameras.

Still, the yellow jacketed firemen who inspected the damage kept glancing incredulously back towards me. They probably wondered how on earth such an idiot could have been issued a licence. Had I appeared drunk—at least I would have had an excuse.

One fireman sprinkled absorbent granules on the puddle while the 3 others on the truck watched. The crew leader gruffly advised I call a tow truck.

Meanwhile, T. arrived to pick up the kids in her old Taurus.

“How could you be so bloody careless?” She shook her head in disdain.

“Sorry.”

She certainly had her vindication in chiding me for throwing away most of my Dubai savings on a new car.

Later at the service counter of Coquitlam Chrysler, I handed over a cheque. Of course, not a penny of the repair was covered by the warranty. The replacement of the gas tank and labour was billed at nearly \$1000.00—about a third of what T. had paid for her reliable used car. The towing fee was extra.

“Hope you have better luck.”

Kelly, the Service manager, wiggled his nose as he stamped the invoice. He handled my check as if it were a dog turd. No surprise that he offered me neither a courtesy car nor a ride home...

At 3:30 AM, I lay awake dry mouthed, taunting myself with innumerable alterations of the sequence of the afternoon’s events by which the accident might have been averted.

Still, the money haemorrhage and shame were nothing to bear against the apprehension of disaster narrowly missed. What if there had been a fire? The friction of metal and concrete could very easily have ignited the gas. Would the belted-in kids have got out on time? What of TE, having to clamour out from 2 seats back! I gasped in the precision of the tormenting images of horror.

I also realized that along with absorbing another hard lesson, I should be humbly grateful for mercy. Even a fine of \$5000 would hardly make amends for my carelessness. What could be more unforgiveable than putting in danger the lives of my precious fledglings?

At some point in the predawn insomnia, it also occurred that the fates were extracting one more ounce of flesh for the imprudence of the two year 'escape'. In any case, the 'adventure' in Dubai, is already a distant memory...

1999, September



fwt